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A strong case for Realpolitik

THE RIVALS: America and Russia Since World War II. By Adam B. Ulam. Viking. 405 pp. $10

By Anthony Hartley

> A vast, incoherent ambition, an ambition which can only grow in the heart of the oppressed and only be fed with the unhappiness of an entire nation, is fermenting in the heart of the Russian people . . . Russia sees in Europe a prey which, sooner or later, will be handed over to it by our dissensions.

This description of Russian foreign policy was written by the Marquis de Custine around 1840. The United States is only the latest country to feel a threat from Russia without fully indentifying the nature of it.

Adam Ulam has made it his business, first in a monumental history of Soviet foreign policy and now in a book on Russian-American relations since 1945, to demonstrate what Russian policy really is and what American reactions to it should be. Basically his thesis is that the Russians play a normally cautious form of power politics, seeking concrete advantages with pertinacity and diplomatic skill. The response to this has all too frequently been conditioned by a failure to understand what Moscow was up to and by the moralistic prejudices peculiar to Americans.

Thus when Stalin was preparing his takeover of eastern Europe, the United States directed its main efforts to getting the Russians to agree to the structure of the United Nations Organization—something of little real importance in comparison with the redrawing of the map of Europe that was going on at the time. Later, after Stalin's death, Dulles's rigid anti-Communism did not permit him to negotiate with Moscow at a moment when the Soviet Union would have found itself at a disadvantage. When summit meetings started, they failed to produce any concrete bargaining on the part of the American government. Instead there was "the spirit of Camp David"—a jolly rotarian spree, but of absolutely no significance for international politics.

Khrushchev and Kennedy meet in Vienna, 1961

Ulam's main point seems beyond dispute. The way to deal with the Russians is by tough and tenacious diplomacy over a long period. Violent anti-Communism has been as deceptive a guide to American policy as the idea that whooping it up over the vodka with "Uncle Joe" or "B and K" in some way improved relations between the two countries. What is wanted is a firm defense of one's own interests and a prudent exploitation of the adversary's weaknesses. When Russian delegates talk of "American imperialism" at international gatherings, it is inexcusable not to recall events in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It seems probable that the present rulers of Russia despise attempts to conciliate them, but pay attention to a tough diplomatic reaction on the part of an opponent.

One might, of course, have doubts about some of the details in this generally excellent book. Was the unexpected Russian withdrawal from the northern provinces of Persia really caused by Churchill's Fulton speech? Was Khrushchev's objective in placing missiles in Cuba really to force a German peace treaty, deny Germany nuclear weapons, and insure that China should not get them either? The answer to these questions will not be known until the day when we obtain some more conclusive information from the Russian side. Ulam's interpretation is a logical one, but there is usually more muddle about policy-making than he allows for. It may be that Khrushchev himself was not certain how he intended to use the bargaining counter of missiles in Cuba. There was an air of improvisation and opportunism about his policies which does not suggest careful planning.

Ulam rightly places great emphasis on the importance of China for Russian policy. The existence of a hostile Communist power on its eastern border places the Soviet Union in a dilemma which has not yet had its full effect on world politics—largely because of the lack of contact between China and the United States. Now President Nixon and Henry Kissinger have drawn the logical consequences of this situation and called in a new Communist power to balance the old. This step will certainly alarm the Russians and may induce them to display more caution elsewhere—for instance, in the Middle East, where they are over-extended and perhaps vulnerable, as events in the Sudan have recently shown. If so, it will be a striking confirmation of Ulam's view of Russo-American relations and of the advantages for the United States of a foreign policy less subject to moral considerations and more conscious of the real patterns of power in the early Seventies.

Anthony Hartley's most recent book is Gaullism: The Rise and Fall of a Political Movement.